

Race IS a Big Deal: The Childhood Experiences of White, Female Teachers and the Development of Critical Consciousness to “See, Judge and Act”

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This study explores the stories of White, female teachers to understand moments of critical consciousness around race during childhood experiences that may have supported strong relationships with students of color in their teaching careers. Qualitative methods were employed to collect and analyze the stories of five White, female teachers in an urban school district. Findings include colorblind and White privileged stances from childhood that became more critical as participants began teaching students of color and adopted culturally relevant pedagogies and practices to meet their students’ needs. A need for teacher education and school professional development to move educators even further to an action stance of critical consciousness that supports anti-racist and equity literacy pedagogies is discussed.

Keywords: critical consciousness, white teacher identity development, culturally relevant pedagogies, equity literacy, critical race theory, narrative inquiry

In a twenty-five-year career as a teacher, principal and now university professor, I have become increasingly interested in and committed to finding teachers who are able to form strong relationships with students of color in urban schools. When I was a principal charged with hiring teachers, I found that a teacher’s ability to form strong relationships with children who did not share their same race, was a precursor to academic success inside and outside of the classroom. I looked for teachers who sought deep relationships with their students and who wanted to understand the joys and challenges students of color experience in our schools and neighborhoods.

Unfortunately, these teachers (primarily White and female) are hard to find (Schauer, 2015). Too many of the teacher applicants I have interviewed and hired, have been completely unable or unwilling to relate to the students they teach. Their lived experiences have taught them that they are the primary source of knowledge in the room. They assume students of color lack prerequisite knowledge and will always struggle to succeed. They may say they “want to make a difference”, but fail to understand that it is they who need to change for any hope of academic success in our classrooms (Love, 2019; Delpit, 2013). For the study presented, I listened to the childhood stories of White, female teachers who have formed strong relationships with students of color. The study explores moments of critical consciousness as participants were awakened to issues around race as children. The ways these childhood experiences, along with relationships formed with students of color, may have influenced their implementation of culturally relevant pedagogies and practices in their classrooms is explored. Additionally, participant experiences

that do not represent a full realization of critical consciousness from reflection to actions that would be considered anti-racist are discussed.

Statement of the Problem

Urban centers in the United States largely comprise schools where the majority of the students identify as Black or Latino. Over 80% of urban teachers identify as White, middle-class females who do not share the same race or class as the students of color they teach (Love, 2019; Nieto, 2017). This dichotomy of race and class can create barriers to understanding and relating to the experiences and worldviews children of color bring to the classroom (Delpit, 2013; Emdin, 2016; Love, 2019).

The development of strong relationships with students of color is a precursor to student achievement; however, the formation of these relationships require teachers to critically explore race at both personal and pedagogical levels (Ladson-Billings, 2014, 1994). This process includes the development of critical consciousness as first theorized by Freire (1994). Critical consciousness is “the ability to recognize and analyze systems of inequality and the commitment to take action against these systems” (El-Amin, Seider & Graves et. al p. 18). In the classroom, teachers who recognize racial inequalities often incorporate culturally relevant pedagogies and spend a great deal of time trying to see the world through the eyes of the students they serve (Ladson-Billings, 2014, 1994; Sleeter, 2018, 2012). To move into equity and anti-racist stances inside and beyond the classroom, White teachers need to possess deep understandings of their own identities as persons of power and privilege and use their status not to impose White, middle class culture as “the right way”, but seek opportunities to use their power to dismantle oppressive and racist systems. (Delpit, 2013; Gorski, 2016; Kendi, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2014, 1994; Love, 2019).

Purpose of the Study

The research presented for this article is part of a larger study (Schauer, 2015). A primary purpose of the research was to explore the stories of White, female teachers to understand ways moments of critical consciousness around race in childhood experiences may have supported strong relationships with students of color in their teaching careers.

To this end, the overarching research question and sub questions explored in this article are as follows:

1. What are the childhood experiences of White, female teachers that supported critical consciousness of race and how have these formative experiences been further understood in their experiences as teachers with students of color?
2. What childhood and adolescent experiences with family or friends allowed participants to understand their own racial identity and the racial identities of people of color?
3. What experiences as a teacher allowed participants to explore issues around race and implement pedagogies and practices that support students of color in their classrooms?

This study is significant because similar studies have explored pre-service experiences as the beginning point of reference in racial identity development (Andrews et al, 2018; Cochran-

Smith, 2012; Romano, 2008). This leaves a gap in the literature that would explore racial identity development as shaped by the childhood experiences of teachers. An understanding of childhood experiences might better support teacher education programs and K-12 schools that seek to foster the development of critical consciousness and the implementation of equity and anti-racist pedagogies. Additionally, schools are seeking ways to respond to a national focus on racial injustice as evidenced in the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmad Arbery. The racial identity development of White teachers is important to consider so anti-racist curriculum and practices can be supported and implemented in K-12 schools of all racial demographics.

Literature Review

Critical Consciousness

Critical consciousness is “the ability to recognize and analyze systems of inequality and the commitment to take action against these systems” (El-Amin, Seider & Graves et. al p. 18). The concept was developed by Freire and was primarily focused on the conscious minds of the oppressed. It has since been expanded to include those who seek to aid liberation, such as teachers (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Critical consciousness consists of three components: critical reflection, political efficacy and critical action or to use Freire's terms “see, judge, act” (Gibson, 1999; Watts et al., 2011). Freire proposed that the use of his see-judge-act student-centered methods could lead to critical consciousness: “an awareness of the necessity to constantly unveil appearances designed to protect injustice which serves as a foundation for action toward equality and democracy” (Gibson, 1999, p. 129). For Freire, no form of education could be neutral; all pedagogy is a call to action. “Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of generations into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the ‘practice of freedom’, the means by which men and women deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world” (Freire in Mayo, 1999: p.5).

An acute level of awareness of inequalities, coupled with a desire to take action through pedagogical and political practices, is important to understanding the belief formation of teachers and ways they become critically conscious (Shim, 2008). The see, judge and act components of critical consciousness are cyclical in practice. The research of Watts and Hipolito-Delgado (2015) describe these components in terms of critical social analysis, collective identification, political self-efficacy and sociopolitical action. Critical social analysis, which is often called critical reflection, involves a realization that inequalities exist and the role of power in sustaining them (Watts and Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). For White teachers, a first step in critical consciousness is that they can see inequities as experienced by students of color or other marginalized groups as instituted and perpetuated by dominant systems of power. Collective identification refers to a positive view of membership in a particular social group such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender. For White teachers, it is important that they judge their students to be capable of academic success by holding high expectations for students of color and other marginalized groups (Delpit, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Love, 2019). Political efficacy speaks to an awareness of one’s status in systems of power and confidence that change to inequitable structures is possible. People are not likely to engage in action if they do not judge the issue is worth pursuing or change is actually possible (Watts and Hipolito-Delgado, 2015).

Socio political action is the next step of critical consciousness where action is taken to change social and structural systems of inequality. For White teachers, this means challenging and dismantling oppressive pedagogies and practices inside their classrooms and across the structures of school systems (Gorski, 2016; Love, 2019). Freire believed that reflection would lead to action and action would lead to further reflection (Freire, 1994). However, most literature around critical consciousness tends to focus on the reflective aspects and how to awaken awareness of inequality. The means and methods to build on critical awareness and efficacy to move into action are less explored (Watts, 2011). Without action, the full definition of critical consciousness is not realized. However, critical consciousness is not a final destination or state of being; a person can engage in critical consciousness in one experience and then not engage in the next (McDonough, 2009). As schools and teacher preparation programs seek to develop critical consciousness in their teachers, pedagogies and policies that address all three aspects of Freire's see, judge and act process will be required.

Whiteness and Teacher Identity Development

A first step in the development of critical consciousness is an ability to see one's identity as it is positioned within social and structural systems of power (Freire, 1994; Kendi, 2019; Watts, 2011). Racial identity is particularly salient because it was constructed by Whites to separate themselves as superior to people of color (DiAngelo, 2018; Kendi, 2019). As a result, the importance of racial identity has been explored extensively for minority groups and ways they are able to develop positive identities despite discrimination and persecution from dominant race groups (Collins, 2017). However, the subject of racial identity formation for dominant groups, especially Whites in the United States has been less explored (DiAngelo, 2018). Frankenberg's research in the early 1990's explored White female identity and situated Whiteness within geographic contexts. According to Frankenberg, Whiteness is experienced as a structural advantage. It is also a way of looking at the world and seeing those views as normal. (Frankenberg, 1993). Intersectionality refers to the ways people can be oppressed by race, gender, sexuality and other identities markers (Crenshaw, 2017). The ways in which aspects of a person's identity can simultaneously privilege and oppress is relevant in thinking about White women who are privileged in race while oppressed in gender (Crenshaw, 2017; Fine, 1997).

The racial identity of Black teachers has been more explored in the literature than White teacher identity (Foster, 1997; Milner, 2006; Siddle-Walker, 1996). However, the ways in which White teachers make meaning of their racial identities, and place them within their context of work with students of color, is important to understanding ways teachers are able to critically consider issues of race within their classrooms. McIntyre (1997) states that an exploration of Whiteness "has been missing from much of the educational discourse in U.S. society" (p. 4). Through the work of participatory action research (PAR) with White, female teachers, McIntyre helps teachers make meaning of Whiteness and how it functions in their work with students of color. Powell (1997) explores ways White teachers develop an understanding of Whiteness and expanded their pedagogical practices to be more inclusive of students of color. Yoon (2012) also uses PAR to explore the connections between White female teachers' beliefs, intentions, and actions in relation to their students of color. According to Chubbuck (2004), the possibility that White teachers' dispositions toward race may create "internal obstacles to the implementation of both effective pedagogy and curriculum and a transformative response to inequitable policies" is

important to consider (p. 302). Additionally, White teachers often adopt colorblind stances where they reject the salience of race and deny its effect on issues of equity. This can manifest in schools through tracking policies, low expectations and feelings that effort is all that is needed to do well in school (Chubbuck, 2004).

According to Cochran-Smith (2012) teacher identity is formed through the intersection of beliefs, prior life experiences, opportunities for on-going professional support and the context of the school environment. To move beyond colorblind views and deficit approaches to pedagogy and policies, White teachers need to engage in opportunities for critical reflection and action that are on-going and reiterative. In this way, learning to teach becomes “a process and not an event” (Cochran-Smith, 2012, p. 109). This framing of becoming a teacher is similar to Freire’s conception of critical consciousness where reflection leads to action and action leads to further reflection (Andrews et al, 2018). As White teachers are able to see that inequities in school are the result of structures of oppression rather than personal deficiencies in their students, they tend to adopt policies and pedagogies that are equity oriented and culturally relevant (Gorski, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Love, 2019).

Equity Literacy Practices

Equity literacy may provide the language, theory and pedagogy to jumpstart moments of critical consciousness in White, female teachers as it requires them to move away from limited and often stereotyped views of culture to assessments of self, curriculum and pedagogies that are equitable and anti-racist. Banks (2013) laments stereotyped heroes and holidays approaches to cultural recognition of people of color that are both separated from the mainstream curriculum and do little to oppose the status quo by challenging racism.

The path that leads to the use of the Gorski’s (2013) term equity literacy practices stems from culturally relevant pedagogies as termed by Ladson-Billings (1994). Culturally relevant teaching is defined as using the “cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (Gay, 2002, p.108). It is based on the “assumption that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly” (Gay, 2002, p.110). The work of Ladson-Billings centers the experiences and cultures of students of color as unique and requires teachers to understand them to teach them effectively. Over the past two decades, efforts to redefine and reclaim culturally relevant pedagogies has been explored. Ladson-Billings writes in “Culturally Relevant Pedagogies 2.0 a.k.a. the Remix” that her original intentions for culturally relevant pedagogy have taken on a life of its own and often does not include high expectations for learning and a focus around equity and justice (2014). She points to culturally sustaining pedagogies as theorized by Paris (2012) as a better representation of these ideals (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Culturally sustaining pedagogies “seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (Paris, 2012, p. 93).

Iterations of culturally relevant pedagogies, whether theorized as responsive or sustaining, retain culture as the first descriptor. Culture as a construct is broad, evolving and open to interpretation.

In schools, the interpretation of culture is largely defined by the dominant group, White female teachers. Building on the work of Banks, Gorski writes that White educators co-opt culture into celebrations of heroes and holidays for marginalized groups and fail to consider or teach equity and justice (Banks, 2013; Gorski, 2016). Gorski posits equity as a descriptor that requires dominant groups to address inequalities and our role in perpetuating them in both classrooms and school systems (2016).

By framing the equity literacy knowledge and skills explicitly and consistently around equity rather than culture (allowing, again, that culture is an important equity concern among many important equity concerns), we are constructing a framework and a movement keeping issues like racism and heterosexism at the center of the conversation, making it more difficult for the institutions with which we work to tiptoe away from that conversation and back to cultural diversity. (Gorski, 2016. p.225)

The equity literacy framework is designed to equip educators with four primary equity-based abilities:

1. the ability to recognize even the subtlest forms of inequity, such as subtle ways in which students' home languages might be denigrated in a school environment;
2. the ability to respond in the immediate term to inequity, such as by skillfully challenging colleagues or students who denigrate students' home languages;
3. the ability to redress inequity in the long term, such as by effectively and equitably attending to the deeper cultural dynamics of the institution that make people believe it is acceptable to denigrate students' home languages; and
4. the ability to sustain equity efforts—even in the face of resistance. (Gorski, 2013)

Anti-Racist Pedagogy and Critical Race Theory

Anti-racist pedagogy is “a paradigm located within critical theory utilized to explain and counteract the persistence and impact of racism using praxis as its focus to promote social justice for the creation of a democratic society in every respect” (Blakeney, 2005 p. 119). Using anti-racist pedagogy as a lens for analysis gets at the heart of teaching as a political act as Freire envisioned in “see, judge, act”. Anti-racist pedagogy clearly calls out in its name that racist pedagogies and policies are the reasons students of color struggle to survive, let alone thrive in our schools (Love, 2019). It also serves to shift responsibility for these struggles back to their source in white supremacy (Kendi, 2019). As Blakeney writes,

Anti-racist pedagogy is born out of social oppression and the inability of current social theory to improve the resulting oppression, which requires interpretation from the Critical Theory perspective of sociology. Anti-racist pedagogy assists in the elimination of social oppression through the revelation of its oppressive nature, which is in keeping with the goal of Critical Theory. (2005, p.121)

Through this lens, the study presented specifically examined the roles and intersections of White teacher identity and the development of critical consciousness on understanding and relating to students of color from the perspective of White, female teachers. The design of this study

selected participants whose racial identity as White represented the dominant race in our country. Interview questions probed the participants' understanding of their White identity as one situated in power and privilege and ways they viewed and interacted with people of color in childhood and classroom contexts. The extent to which the participants were silent around an awareness of structural forces that served to oppress, and their relative lack of involvement in collective action, was also analyzed through anti-racist pedagogy and critical race theory.

Methods

For this study, a narrative approach was used to collect and analyze data. Narrative inquiry can be traced to Aristotle's *Poetics* and Augustine's *Confessions* (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Czarniawska (2004) defines narrative as "spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected" (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 17). Features of narrative writing include lived stories from individuals that tell experiences and shed light on identities, collaboration between researchers and subjects, include various forms of data and are organized and analyzed through a chronological structure. Additionally, narratives often include the analysis of themes, turning points and contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2013). I selected this approach because I was trying to understand the past experiences of teachers that helped shape their beliefs and attitudes toward teaching students of color. More specifically, I was looking for themes that might emerge that were consistent with identity development, critical consciousness and equity literacy pedagogies to explain ways teachers were able to traverse boundaries of race to form strong relationships with students of color. Narratives have been used in school environments and help to understand the "context for making meaning of school situations" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2).

The participants for this study included five White, middle-class women who were currently successful in their abilities to form strong relationships with students of color in urban school environments. This selection of participants was aligned with purposive sampling techniques of unique sampling where subjects are chosen for possessing rare or atypical qualities or attributes (Merriam & Merriam, 2009, p. 78). The success of White, female teachers in their abilities to form strong relationships with students of color has been considered atypical in the research so selection of this population can be considered unique (Love, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2014, 1994; Delpit, 2013; Nieto, 2003).

Teachers who have been able to form strong relationships with their students were identified by using snowball sampling techniques. For this study, I began by asking the superintendent of a large urban school district to recommend school principals who they believed had an understanding of the importance of strong teacher-student relationships and culturally responsive pedagogies and practices. The principals then served as the nominators for the White, female teachers in their building who were also able to form strong relationships with students of color and who have demonstrated culturally responsive pedagogies and practices. This layered nomination approach provided better reliability than randomly selecting principals who may not themselves have understood the importance of these characteristics. A total of five teachers were selected from a large urban school district for participation in the study.

Interviews followed both structured and semi-structured formats. Structured interview questions included basic demographic data as self-reported from the participant such as age, race, and number of years teaching. Semi-structured interview questions allowed for open responses and deep exploration of topics. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. An observation of the participants' teaching was conducted to look for relationships with students of color and pedagogies and practices that might be considered culturally responsive. Follow up questions for a second interview were created based on practices observed. The interview and observation protocol is detailed in the appendix.

An analysis of the findings began with descriptions of each participant and explored their experiences in childhood and subsequent teaching careers as they negotiated issues of race and formed strong relationships with students of color. Open coding techniques were used to code data and classify data by emerging themes. The software program NVivo was utilized where interview transcripts were uploaded and allowed me to code and analyze data for similarities and differences as they related to emerging themes. Transcripts were read and re-read multiple times as new themes were identified and coded. This practice allowed for an inventory of codes that included the following: name of code, its meaning, examples of its presence in the data and relationship to other codes. Quotes highlighted in the findings section represent examples of statements that were expressed numerous times and became themes from the stories told.

Participants

The five participants for this study all teach at different schools within the same large, urban school district. The school district serves approximately 40,000 students where approximately 70% are Black, 15% are White and 15% are Latino. All students are considered economically disadvantaged and qualify for the Federal Free and Reduced Lunch Program. The participants range in age from forty-one to fifty-one years of age and have been teaching for fifteen to twenty-eight years. Four out of five participants work with upper elementary/middle school age children and the fifth participant teaches primary age students. Participants were nominated by their building principals as teachers who were able to form strong relationships with students of color. Pseudonyms were used for all participants.

Subjectivity of the Researcher

As a member of the demographic I am researching it is important to share my relationship to the research and potential biases. I entered the study thinking I would encounter affluent, White women who had limited experiences in their youth engaging with people of color. This expectation stemmed from my lived experiences as a principal where most of the teachers I worked with met these criteria. Consequently, I expected to hear childhood stories that might speak to general stories around fairness, equality and compassion that supported their strong relationships with students of color in their classrooms. I did not expect the participants would include blue collar, middle class women who all had direct experiences with people of color as children. I did not have experiences with people of color as a child; but I did share a childhood that included periods of situational poverty that were in common with two of the participants. Sharing the same race as my participants and then discovering similarities to my own experiences, allowed for ease of conversation and allowed for the collection of rich data. To

assist with understanding my biases, I wrote anecdotal notes to record moments in the research process that challenged or surprised my thinking or led to new understandings of myself and others. This reflexive writing helped address my subjectivity and provided another dimension to pursue in my analysis.

Findings

Heidi

Heidi grew up on military bases around the world and moved frequently to follow her father's career as an officer. On the bases, Heidi had opportunities to attend classes and play with children of many races and socio-economic statuses. In her narrative, however, she says that it was not until she was older and entered civilian life, that she realized the housing on the base was separated by rank. Differences of race and class were not discussed in her family and ways the base may or may have not been divided by race or class.

I grew up as a military child so I did not see race. I don't know why that is...I mean on the base everyone as far as socioeconomic were all pretty much the same. My dad was an officer. Unfortunately, the way we lived I didn't realize at the time that there were different areas on the base where there were different ranks of people...I didn't know any of that. It wasn't discussed. And as far as race everybody was equal and I know that sounds really Pollyanna but it just wasn't an issue.

Heidi describes the base as a melting pot where people of different races, classes and religions were able to coexist in a way where she did not see any differences. It was not until she left the bases and entered civilian schools that she realized how judgmental people could be depending on how much money you had or did not have.

I still don't know what would have transpired or if it would've been different growing up if I had only attended civilian school as a young child. I don't know...race was not an issue.

In Heidi's early teaching career, she took a position at a juvenile corrections institution (administered through the school district where she currently teaches) where she taught middle school boys. She admits that she "never saw [herself] teaching at a youth corrections facility and nobody else I knew would either". But once inside, she was exposed to a whole other world that served to dispel stereotypes she held about troubled youth. In this position, she worked with boys who were low-level offenders with violations related primarily to drugs, theft or gang related violence. She remembered one particular boy she helped improve academically. She spoke to the day she read his file and could not believe he did the things that placed him at the corrections facility. This experience taught her to "look beyond the label" and be "open-minded".

I just couldn't read reports and think really...how could he have done that and if we had seen each other elsewhere would he have treated me the same way as he was treating me in the classroom? Would he have been as receptive I wonder...and for me it was like I was able to cross a ton of barriers with this

child and get him to achieve and so for both ends...he was academically successful and I was just able to be surprised.

Linda

Linda grew up in a wealthy suburb outside of the large city where she currently teaches. Linda's grandparents owned a corner store in a neighborhood that has changed from a primarily eastern European immigrant population to predominately African-American. When Linda was a child, she and her father and mother would help out in the store on the weekends and Linda would often play with the children in the neighborhood. Linda remembers traveling through the heart of the city to get to the store which was located on the eastside of town and seeing ways the housing changed from her home in the suburbs to the projects in the city to deteriorating homes by the corner store.

Just seeing the class difference and the type of housing that we lived in and the houses we saw in that area and going through the projects and seeing...my eyes were opened at a young age to that.

Linda grew up during the Civil Rights Movement and vividly remembers traveling through areas on her way to her grandmother's store where protests had taken place and worrying for her safety. She credits her father's love of the city and its people for not deterring their weekly trips to the other side of town. She says that those experiences also "opened her eyes" to differences in race and class.

At the time, there was a lot of racial tension in [the city]. I remember the riots and driving through that area and not totally understanding what was going on but it was all part of the Civil Rights Movement. And I can remember ducking because we were afraid...we heard it on the news...we heard mom and dad talking about it...and my sister and I would duck in the back seat because we were afraid we were going to get shot, but the riots weren't even going on when we were driving through, but that...just working at the store...it opened my eyes. There were so many ethnic cultures that were there. I realized that I am from a middle class family and very fortunate to have what I have.

In her first years of teaching, Linda was able to form a strong relationship with one of her students that continues to this day. He identifies as Latino and she also taught his siblings. He is currently in law school and keeps in touch regularly. A few years ago, Linda taught an African-American middle school boy who was involved in the court systems and wore an ankle bracelet to monitor his locations. Despite this outward sign of potential academic and social trouble, Linda did not look into the child's past records and gave the student a "fresh start". At one point in the year, the student's mother called with concern that she hadn't been contacted by the teacher yet. To the mother's surprise, Linda reported that he was one of her best students. He is currently doing well in high school and keeps Linda informed of his progress.

He came in with an ankle bracelet on and was kind of quiet...and I don't dig through their records unless a flag come up, because every kids deserves a fresh start and later on in the year he was one of my best kids. His mom called and asked, 'Is he ok, I usually

hear something' and I was like, no he's one of my best students in here what are you talking about? He just had a fresh start and so at the end of the year I was putting records away and found this huge file and I was like, What the heck happened? And it was just having a fresh start and nobody asked questions about his past. He came here and he still keeps in touch. I think he's in 10th or 11th grade and he will still pop by to see us...but he's doing really well.

This relationship taught Linda the importance and power that giving a student a fresh start could yield. It taught her not to judge her students and to believe that every child deserves a chance. She also learned to ignore her colleague's opinions of students and not engage in conversations that discussed their past experiences.

They have to screw up pretty bad...every day is a new day and we start fresh. We talk it through and not in front of the class. I pull them aside and talk about it, but at that point, I usually just have to give them the eye. But it's taught me that kids need chances. They have to be able to start fresh. It's not about the labels put on kids. I can remember when I first started, people would say, 'Oh, you've got the worst kids' and I would say, Oh, don't tell me that...let me decide.

Sharon

Sharon was born in a rural area about two hours east of the city school district where she currently teaches. Her elementary school was across the street from her house and her playmates in the neighborhood reflected the diversity of the west-side of the city. Her best friend was African-American and she says that race was "never a big deal" for her and that "people were people". Sharon loved her teachers and especially remembers her third grade teacher for the ways she presented multiple ways to solve problems in math.

Sharon speaks to ways her life changed dramatically in fourth grade when district-wide desegregation practices transferred her to a school on the eastside of the city. The bus ride to the school was forty-five minutes long and she was the only White student in her class. Her teacher yelled all day long and Sharon believes she first wanted to become a teacher that year because "I swore every day that I would never yell at children the way she held us hostage. She was just never happy. I always said that I never want kids to feel that way." She also experienced bullying on a daily basis and the bus was especially difficult as it was less supervised. One day on the bus ride home, she had enough of the bullying and hit a girl with her metal lunchbox. Her mom was called up to the school and then transferred her to a private school closer to her home. Her mother indicated that she was transferred for safety reasons and did not make any comments that connected issues around race as a reason for the change.

I was bullied. The bus was ruthless. I remember that I always the smallest kid and I had a metal lunch box...but even though I had never had a confrontation with anybody this group of girls on the bus would just pick with me and put stuff in my hair and tease me. 'You White girl, you little White girl'...and one day I had enough and hit the girl with my lunchbox.

At her second teaching assignment, Sharon describes a turning point moment that led to new pedagogies that she uses in her classroom to this day. At the end of the day, she observed one of her second grade students climbing out of the dumpster and filling his book bag with food.

That really made me realize that we need to be more in tune with...it's not all about a test or what needs to be done...I really need to take more time to balance. How can I expect a kid in second grade to study for a math facts test when he doesn't even have a meal at night? That was early in my teaching and since then I made a positive effort every day to make sure I made time for socio-emotional time.

This time set aside for socio-emotional care includes allowing students time to write in journals, place anonymous notes in a box on her desk and holding daily "family meetings" where students can talk about anything on their minds. Sharon believes these meetings give students a voice in the classroom and they are better able to focus on academic tasks when they have "gotten things off their chest". With the prevalence of cell phones, all students have her personal number and are invited to call if they have a problem.

Carla

Carla grew up in a working-class neighborhood in a neighboring city to the district where she currently teaches. Carla attended elementary school with students of many ethnic backgrounds. When Carla was a teen, the movie "The Godfather" came out which she says further challenged her Italian-American identity. She said the movie was ironically her father's favorite movie because he thought it was very authentic, but Carla felt the movie further served to stereotype her nationality. Despite these stereotypes, Carla's family taught her to "accept all people". Her father's role as a plumbing contractor led to many invitations to weddings of co-workers, several of which were African-American. Carla remembers being the only White child at these weddings and appreciates the early exposures to other races and ethnicities her father fostered. Today, Carla describes her extended family as "the United Nations" with many different ethnicities and races.

When people look at me they say White, but when they see my whole family they see my husband who is White and our kids are White but everybody else around us is something else...Hispanic, African-American, Japanese and Jewish besides your everyday European people.

Carla has been able to form many long term relationships with the students and families she has served at the arts school. However, she felt it was important to note that she is able to form relationships with all students and that she did not really think about race when working with any of her students.

When I started, [at this school] there was a lot more minority because it was an arts school and kids were bused here. I don't know, I do see that they are a different color, but it is not significant to me. It's significant in what their lives are like particularly, Black boys. I am aware of the trial and tribulations that they may go through...So it's just a connection - a human connection.

Vickie

Vickie grew up in poverty in an area on the near Westside of the city where she currently teaches. She describes her neighborhood as one where “this street was the poor Whites, this street was the Puerto Ricans and the projects were mostly the African-Americans, and that was a block away from my house.” Vickie says that poverty was the unifying factor of the neighborhood and people did not spend much time with differences in race. She had White, Black and Latino friends and they were all able to relate to each other because they all shared the same socio-economic status.

It wasn't even race, we all just identified as being poor more than being of a race because we all struggled with the same issues whether it be a block away in the projects with drunk moms who beat on them...those were the same issues that we all saw.

Vickie also believes her mother influenced her to look beyond a person's race and make decisions based on the quality of a person's character.

My mom always taught me... 'You have to find the inside of people'...and that has always spoken to me. I have always had diverse friends. I didn't pick them based on color but on how my mother taught me. Like...were they honest, trustworthy and those kinds of concepts...more of the inside qualities I guess.

Vickie attended schools in her neighborhood during elementary school but her mother pulled her out of the public school in middle school when busing for desegregation started and after her older sister was beaten in a girls' bathroom at a school on the other side of town. The cost of private high school tuition, however, was too much for the family and Vickie was bussed to a high school on the eastside of the city. Vickie explained that this experience opened her eyes to even greater poverty, violence and differences in the quality of education received at predominately African-American schools. Her new classmates often struggled with the curriculum and Vickie found herself tutoring other students to help them pass courses. She says that she first wanted to become a teacher during high school because she felt she was good at helping her peers and she was angry with the teachers at the school for their low expectation of her classmates.

I think I decided to become a teacher when we were bussed. ...I was bussed to [an eastside school]. I knew a lot of us were very smart but our teachers thought really poorly of us and I knew that learning didn't have to be boring out of book. I was always helping my friends so I felt that I was good and it and they would always say 'I understand when you tell me but with the teacher I don't get it.' So I just wanted to help people and I saw that I was good at it. And I just wanted to change...because I had really horrible teachers in high school.

Within her first year of teaching, Vickie formed a relationship with one of her sixth grade boys that continues to this day. De'ante had behavioral issues in his other classes, but Vickie pulled him aside and told him that she recognized that he needed greater challenges and that she wanted to work with him outside of the regular class. In later years, De'ante would tell Vickie that he

worked hard in her class opposed to other classes because he knew she cared and had high expectations that Black kids could learn the same material as White kids. He said he knew that she actually graded his work and took time to help him correct mistakes on this papers when other teachers threw his work away. De'ante said,

Because I knew you cared. You think the Black kids can keep up with the White kids and I love you for that.

Vickie believes that her personal experiences made it easy for her to relate to De'ante and other students who have struggled with poverty, low expectations and poor self-esteem. Her ability to connect in very personal ways with her students creates trust and belief that she is someone who wants to help and can get results.

Another practice Vickie quickly adopted during her first year of teaching and continues to use to this day is a class meeting for students to express their feelings and “get their baggage out”. These sessions were helpful for the students and also helped them form strong relationships with Vickie because she easily identified with the struggles they discussed in the meetings.

The kids would come in so angry, so I had to get their baggage out....so in the morning we would share about their weekends, and I would share stuff and that helped us bond and they would say, ‘Oh, you know what a project looks like, you used to live by one.’ And I would say, yes, my best friend lived in one...there is a doorway and then a hallway that you go through. And they were like, ‘Oh my God, she knows about that’.

But as much as Vickie believes she can relate to her students, she is also quick to point out that it is hard for Whites, even Whites with backgrounds similar to her own, to truly grasp the extra complexities that growing up as a poor student of color, and especially a Black male can yield. She said that working with De'ante opened her eyes to the many barriers Black males face.

Discussion

“Race was not a big deal”: Colorblind Views of Race

It is interesting to explore the extent to which comfort with diversity and acknowledgment of differences in race may have been informed with colorblind stances. In Heidi's stories, it appears her parents were accepting of other races and allowed her to play with children of color on the military bases. This early exposure to diversity may have allowed Heidi to interact more comfortably with persons of color later in life because she had prior experiences and unspoken parental approval. However, despite these early interactions, Heidi recounted that race was not discussed in her family. Heidi's father was an officer and it can be assumed that considering the time period of her narrative, children of color lived on a different part of the base due to the rank and employment status of their parents. The assumed separation by race on the military base was absent from her narrative.

One explanation for this absence could be that Heidi's parents wanted her to grow up with positive attitudes toward children of color and also positive views of herself as a White child.

Parents naturally want to build the self-esteem of their children. To discuss race as salient would require conversations of power and privilege that could be difficult for a young child to process and could result in feelings of guilt or anxiety (DiAngelo, 2018). Without a clear strategy to discuss race with White children in a way that does not make them feel guilty or anxious, many parents may opt for silence as the best way to communicate racial acceptance. (Delpit, 2013). In this way, color is seen but not discussed as a way to convey acceptance of students of color while still preserving a positive identity as White.

Similarly, Carla states that “race was not an issue” and talked about ways her family was included in Black weddings. She does not consider, however, that her father’s role as the supervisor may have resulted in invitations that may have been more obligatory in nature than genuine expressions of inclusion. Carla told stories of attending African-American weddings as a child, but it appears her parents did not engage her in conversations around race and reasons she may have been the only White girl at the wedding. The colorblind stance of Carla’s narratives is interesting to note since many of the stories she told reflected her feelings of discrimination as a member of a European immigrant minority population in her city. That she could so clearly articulate discrimination within White ethnicities but could not speak to racial discrimination speaks to the White privilege inherent in colorblind views. (Collins, 2017; DiAngelo, 2018).

“Look to the inside of people”: White Privilege to Minimize Race

Sharon and Vickie were students in the city where they currently teach during court ordered desegregation and resulting bussing practices that transferred students across town to create more racial balance in the schools. This practice, however, resulted in the parents of many White students, including Sharon and Vickie, pulling them from the public schools due to travel and safety reasons. Sharon experienced violence on a first hand basis and was bullied at the school and on the bus ride home. She went from playing with her best friend in her neighborhood who was Black, to girls who looked like her friend shouting, “You little White girl, you little White girl”. Despite these experiences with bullying, Sharon did not form negative perceptions of African-Americans. Sharon became acutely aware of race on a personal level. It appears, however, that her negative experience with her White fourth grade teacher at the school across town, contrasted with her positive experience with her White third grade teacher at her neighborhood school, may have allowed her to develop a level of empathy for her Black classmates. It would appear Sharon was able to engage in critical consciousness where she could see race, but was not judge the reasons that her White teacher of predominantly Black students engaged in deficit views and pedagogies (Freire, 1994; Delpit, 2013). As such, her current understanding of the experience might best be described as evidence of racial consciousness which is a beginning step of critical consciousness (McDonough, 2009). It would be interesting to explore whether professional development around critical consciousness could build on her past experiences and move her to judgement and action.

Additionally, Sharon did not reference any negative racial comments made by her mother toward the students in her class who were bullying her. Her mother removed her from the school for safety reasons, but race was not emphasized as a reason for the transfer. White privilege may have allowed her mother the freedom to situate race in court ordered desegregation to the extent

she felt comfortable. These actions may have served to shield her daughter from racist views but they also did little to help her judge racism through individual or systemic lenses. Similar to professional development opportunities, resources that help parents move themselves and their children to judge and act on racism are needed.

Sharon's experience was similar to Vickie's experiences where she was assigned to a high school on the other side of the city from her home. The experience helped Vickie understand inequalities in education and the low expectations teachers often held for students of color. But similar to Sharon, Vickie's mother's views did not characterize the negative aspects of the experience as attributed to race. So while Vickie was able to see race and even judge inequitable practices, she was not given a framework that would describe her experiences as framed by racism in school ideology or practice. White privilege allowed Vickie's mother to leave White responsibility and the perpetuation of racism out of the conversation. A look to the inside of people stance encourages both colorblind and privileged practices that serve to protect White egos and accountability for personal and systemic racism (DiAngelo, 2018).

“Opened My Eyes to Differences”: Critical Consciousness to See Race

Linda articulated an early understanding of race and her family helped her see differences of race as it related to power and privilege. As a child, she grew up in a suburban neighborhood of privilege. Her experiences with students of color came not in her neighborhood, but in traveling through the city to help out at her grandmother's corner store. In these travels, she realized the extent to which the city was segregated. These realizations were further informed by her father who loved to take the children to Chinatown and other ethnic areas of the city. The family also drove through the city during times of intense racial tensions where protests that gained national attention occurred. The negative ways these events were broadcast on the news and the family's continued travel through these same neighborhoods was a powerful demonstration that even though the girls would duck in the backseat, their father and mother were not deterred from their weekend trips to work at the family store, nor was race negatively framed by her parents during the protests. On the contrary, Linda's father stressed his love for the city and a hope that the protests would lead to racial equality. Her travels through the city opened her eyes to the differences between her neighborhood which was predominately White and wealthy and the neighborhood of her grandmother which was predominately Black and impoverished. The ways race was framed by her family may have allowed Linda to form positive views of other races and an ability to see race in her weekday life in the suburbs and her weekend life in the city. These accounts are consistent with Freire's conceptualization of critical reflection, where Linda was able to see that racial inequalities exist and begin to see herself and her family as positioned in wealth and power (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015).

Learning to “Look Beyond the Label”: Critical Consciousness to Judge Race

The early experiences of the participants with racial diversity may have primed them for moments of critical consciousness as they formed relationships with their students and adopted culturally relevant practices as teachers in schools with students of color. For Heidi and Linda, their experiences with students who had been labeled as at-risk by their school and juvenile court records gave them opportunities, as the relationships strengthened, to look beyond the label and

judge their children as people with unique gifts and potential. Linda has carried the lessons learned in her early relationships with difficult students to allow all children in her class to receive a fresh start. She does not look at student records at the beginning of the year and will not listen to the opinions of colleagues, asking that they let her decide her thoughts on students. Similarly, Heidi has deepened her commitment to look beyond the label with the primary students she now serves and understands the ways that her early judgments of a child could remain with the child for their entire school career. She consciously looks for the strengths of each child and makes sure her assessments of these strengths are communicated to the child, their parents and her school community. Linda and Heidi not only see race, but judge their students to be fully capable of academic success which is an important aspect of collective identification and is closely aligned with definitions of culturally relevant teachers (Nieto, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

“Getting their baggage out”

For Sharon, Carla and Vickie, their early relationships influenced pedagogies where students could better talk with them and their peers in the classroom to “get their baggage out”. For Carla, this has meant cooperative grouping where she can sit right beside a student and have a conversation that is either academic or socio-emotional in nature. Vickie and Sharon’s relationships with students have opened their eyes to a need for them to take time for socio-emotional learning and the many teachable moments that can arise in a school day. To address these needs, both teachers have adopted class meetings or family meetings to give students opportunities to share concerns and problem solve solutions. Of the participants, Sharon and Vickie had early life experiences that most closely resembled those of their students, so it is interesting to see ways that they have dedicated large amounts of class time to providing opportunities for student voice and socio-emotional health. Using class meetings as a guiding pedagogy demonstrates care to students and also a belief that their voice is important and needs to be heard and considered. Holding high expectations for student achievement and providing opportunities for student voice are key components of culturally relevant pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1994). In these examples, the participants may have a less sophisticated critical analysis of race but their collective identification with poverty helps them hold high expectations with their students and create space for student voice (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015).

What is Missing in the Narratives?: Critical Consciousness to Act on Race

The participants in the study had opportunities to see and judge race in childhood and classroom experiences. There is little evidence, however, that any of the participants advanced in their critical consciousness development to a stance of action which would include political efficacy and socio political action to challenge systems of inequality (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). Linda and Heidi looked beyond the label to hold high expectations for students in their classrooms but they did not share stories of challenging school practices that allow disciplinary infractions to follow students throughout their school careers. Perhaps they did not feel they had the power to effect change beyond their own classrooms. Perhaps they did not know how to start the conversation with school administrators, fellow teachers or even the students themselves.

Similarly, Carla, Sharon and Vickie see and judge a need for cooperative and socio-emotional learning. They created space in their curriculum for these culturally relevant pedagogies but did not share stories that sought to eliminate the types of trauma their students experienced. Their sense of efficacy was limited to triage pedagogies that did little to disrupt and dismantle racism and oppression as root causes of student trauma. Without systems that support efficacy and action, teachers will struggle to move from critical reflection to critical action (Basque & Britto, 2019).

Equity Literacy and Anti-Racist Pedagogy

From the stories told in this study it is clear that words, and the absence of words such as race, racism and anti-racism, matter in the development of critical consciousness. Words can support action or inaction. In the childhood stories, participants were introduced to race through an absence of words. Colorblind stances were taken in efforts to situate race as “not a big deal”. And while arguably this position is preferred to overt racism, it did little to help participants see race as it was present in their daily lives. Parents, and especially White parents, need to explicitly name and speak to the salience of race in anti-racist language. Kendi (2019, 2017) is the best-selling author of “How to Become an Anti-Racist” and “Stamped for the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racism in America”. He has adapted his texts on anti-racism to make them accessible to young children and adolescents. Kendi’s “Antiracist Baby” offers language for parents in board book format and a young adult version of “Stamped: Racism, Anti-racism and You” is geared to preteen children (2020, 2019). White children need opportunities to critically reflect on inequalities and understand ways that power and privilege perpetuate racism. For Heidi this would require conversations about officers on the military base and why they so often look like her father, a White man. For Carla, it would include a discussion of ethnic discrimination but also racial discrimination and ways it might harm her father’s Black co-workers. For Sharon and Vickie, a direct conversation around desegregation and the reasons their parents were supporting it would have provided language that included race, racism and anti-racism to accompany the inequities they saw in their classrooms.

As teachers, the participants were better able to see race and judge their students to be capable of high academic standards through the strong relationship formed. Direct conversations around race, however, remained largely absent from the participants’ classrooms. In classrooms, colorblind or silent views of race serve as subtle ways to preserve White privilege, despite a teacher’s best intentions (Chubbock, 2010). If a teacher says “race is not a big deal” that is effectively the end of the conversation. But for her Black and Latino students who know race is a big deal, her silence serves to contradict the narratives told to them by their parents and their personal experiences with race. Heidi and Sharon both stated that race did not come up in their classroom. What they may fail to understand is that the topic of race most likely does come up in the classroom – they are just not engaged in the discussion. Students in the classroom may interpret this silence as another form of subtle racism (Chubbock, 2010). White teachers need to recognize subtle forms of power and ways they can unintentionally disenfranchise children of color from schools. Conversations around race may be difficult; but spaces for them to occur must be initiated and co-created with students.

For these reasons, the words and language of equity literacy and anti-racist pedagogy give teachers and students clear and direct language to address and act on racist pedagogies and practices. The language of culturally relevant, responsive and sustainable situates people and culture as the entry point to conversations around race. Anti-racist pedagogy and equity literacy situate power and systems as the entry point. Gorki's equity framework gives teachers language to recognize and respond to inequality in schools (2016). It gives them the words to see, judge and then act on curriculum, policies and practices. Critical consciousness can become stuck in inaction. This inaction, and lack of efficacy to change, can lead to deficit views of children. The terminology of culture can activate White privilege while the terminology of equity and anti-racism serves to call out privilege and demand systemic change.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Study

This study was limited to the stories of the five, White female teachers who agreed to participate. Their stories and common themes found within them cannot be generalized for larger populations of teachers. Additionally, the interview questions were broad in scope so participants felt free select a wide range of stories to share. Future studies may want to develop more specific questions to look for moments of critical consciousness that represent both reflection and action.

The findings of this study spoke to a group of dedicated teachers whose childhood experiences with racial diversity may have informed the pedagogies they currently employ in their classrooms and ways they form relationships with their students. These strong relationships are central to the findings of this study. Further studies that explore more explicit connections between childhood experiences, strong relationships with students of color and equity literacy pedagogies are recommended.

During the interview with the principals I asked for additional names if the first teacher refused to participate. In each case, the principal hesitated before offering a second choice. Only one could name a third choice. These principals supervised buildings of 30-40 teachers. That only one, and maybe two could be identified as having strong relationships with students of color and employing culturally relevant, let alone equity literacy practices, speaks to the critical need to speak race in our schools and intentionally work to support teacher identity development and critical consciousness development that leads to action. The participants in this study appear to have built on their childhood experiences to form strong relationships with their students to employ culturally relevant practices. Further studies that explore the racial identity development of teachers who have not had these childhood experiences are needed.

Research that explores the development of critical consciousness in teacher preparation programs and school professional development is important to provide meaningful learning experiences and opportunities for the development of critical consciousness in all three aspects of Freire's conceptualization. The role of anti-racist and equity literacy pedagogies as means to move critical consciousness from reflection to action is recommended.

Author Notes

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Appendix

Interview and Observation Protocol

First Interview Questions:

1. Could you talk to me about your growing up experiences and your decision to become a teacher?
2. How have your original ways of thinking about education and yourself as a teacher changed now that you are in the classroom?
3. Tell me about a student of color with whom you were able to form a strong relationship. How did the relationship start and what does it look like today? In what ways was/is the relationship mutually beneficial?
4. Tell me about a time in your early childhood or adolescence where your family or friends helped you understand your racial identity in relationship to others.
5. Tell me about a time where you struggled with your race in relationship to the students you teach.

After the initial interview, an observation of the participants working with students in their classrooms occurred. The observation was looking for evidence of strong relationships with students and pedagogies and practices that would be considered culturally relevant. From these observations, a second interview took place that sought to qualify data collected in the classroom observation. The questions for the second interview looked for clarification of observed practices as well as narratives that may have influenced these practices. Based on specific observations in each room, some questions were unique to a participant and some became universal for all participants based on emerging themes. Questions asked to all participants are listed below.

Second Interview Questions:

1. Can you talk about your decision making process behind how you set up the physical space of your classroom? How do these decisions impact relationships with your students?
2. How do you decide when to intervene in a group and when to let the students work it out?
3. Do you feel any tensions between the district curriculum and your ideal curriculum? How do you navigate those tensions?
4. In what ways does the curriculum support student empowerment or help them see themselves in the curriculum?
5. Are there any other school practices that support or maybe hinder strong relationships that I did not see when I was here?
6. Are there any practices that you don't support?
7. Is there anything else you want to talk about that supports strong relationships?